

REVITALIZING THE PAST: HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF MUNICIPALITIES IN RINCONADA AREA CAMARINES SUR

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Abstract: This paper discusses the historical background of the municipalities that comprise the Rinconada Area of the Camarines Sur in the Philippines, with the view of rejuvenating and preserving their excellent cultural and historical heritage. The study explores the history and evolution of chosen municipalities, their origins back to the early indigenous communities up to the time when they were founded during the Spanish colonial period and their administrative transformation. The study uses historical documents, local records, and oral accounts by the elderly people in the community to reconstruct historical processes that influenced the identity and development of these municipalities.

The results indicate that the geography, migration, religious missions, and colonial rule had major roles in the foundation and development of the towns in the Rinconada Area. Several contributions to the establishment of many municipalities were the spread of Christianity, the establishment of parishes, and the systematic structure of local government under the Spanish rule. Besides, the historical experiences of the people in the area are still present in cultural traditions, local legends, and practices used by the community.

The paper also helps in the conservation of the local history by capturing these historical origins and understanding of the socio-cultural identity of the Rinconada communities. In conclusion, the study provides insight on the need to protect historical accounts as local heritage that seeks to promote additional research and community-based programs to safeguard and revitalize historical accounts of municipalities in Camarines Sur.

Keywords: *Historical origins, Municipalities, Rinconda Area, Camarines Sur, Local History.*

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Introduction

Historical conservation is an important part of the study of the creation, identities and heritage of people. Local historical research helps scholars and communities to follow the origin of settlements, modes of governance, and customs, which define current societies. As Agoncillo (1990) notes, Philippine local histories offer valuable information on the role of colonial encounters, economic activities and the cultural interactions, in the development of the towns and municipalities in the nation. The study of such local histories makes local communities value their heritage and enhances cultural identity.

One of the historically important districts of the province, that is found in the Bicol Region of the Philippines, is the Rinconada Area in Camarines Sur. Most of its municipalities covered are Baao, Balatan, Bato, Buhi, Bula and Nabua and the City of Iriga. The localities are linguistically, culturally, and historically related, which makes the Rinconada district different to the rest of the province. History records that some of the municipalities in the area began as small settlements which gradually grew up to become independent towns because of the influx of more people, economic growth, and restructuring of its administration at the colonial era (Gerona, 2009).

Historians stress that some of the Philippine towns were created during the Spanish colonial era when missionaries and colonial rulers constructed settlements and parishes all over the archipelago. According to Scott (1994), precolonial settlements were barangays, which were the basis of first settlements which were later rearranged into pueblos under the Spanish rule. A conglomeration of churches, municipal centres and trade networks helped in growth and stabilization of most towns in the Philippines.

In the Bicol Region, settlements and organization of communities was greatly influenced by the creation of mission towns and parishes. According to Gerona (2009), Spanish missionaries significantly contributed to the establishment of towns in the region which was usually dominated by churches which remained the focal point of social, political, and economical life. The municipalities of the Rinconada area were no exceptions; these historical processes were observed in relationships between agriculture, fishing, and religious institutions, which promoted the formation of the local communities.

Moreover, the history of the formation of the municipalities should be written to maintain the cultural heritage and enhance the historical consciousness of communities. The National Historical Commission of the Philippines (2018) underlines that local

historical documentation serves to preserve the cultural heritage and allows the communities to learn more about their history and their identity. This is especially relevant since modernization and urbanization are still affecting most of the historical landscapes in the Philippines.

Even though the Rinconada municipalities have a historical value, numerous details of their formation are scattered in archives, local publications, and folk lore. Thus, these historical accounts must be systematically documented and analyzed. This paper, *Revitalizing the Past: Historical Origin of Municipalities in the Rinconada Area, Camarines Sur*, tries to observe the history of the selected municipalities in the region. The overview aims to add to the conservation and restoration of the historical heritage of Rinconada people by involving historical documents, oral accounts, and related literature in the study.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design employed in this study was a qualitative historical research design, which was aimed at understanding and recording the historical background of the municipalities within the Rinconada Area of Camarines Sur and exploring past events based on the available records and testimonies. This design was deemed to fit well since the study was intended to recreate the historical development of the municipalities by studying the historical documents, archival records and oral narratives of the people well informed in the local history. The qualitative method allowed the researcher to get deep and descriptive narrative of the history of the municipalities and a better understanding of the aspects that influenced the development of the Rinconada Area.

Respondents of the Study

The study respondents comprised of people who are chosen, possessing knowledge and familiarity with the historical background of the municipalities in Rinconada Area in Camarines Sur. These interviewees were local historians, municipal cultural officers, barangay officials, the elderly and employees of local government offices who have a lot of knowledge about the historical development of their respective communities. Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was used to select the respondents as respondents enable the researcher to identify individuals that could offer pertinent and credible information concerning the research. Their experience and acquaintance with the local customs and historical events was a great asset that was used to rebuild the historical background of the municipalities.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide that was prepared by the researcher was the main research tool in this study. The interview guide included open-ended questions that were intended to come up with information on the origin, establishment and historical development of the municipalities present in the Rinconada Area. The questions were based on issues like how the municipality was initially settled, major historical occurrences, cultural practices, and the historical importance of some places or structures in the community. The semi-structured format enabled the researcher to adhere to a series of pre-designed questions, as well as gave adaptability to the respondents to expound on their responses and give more historical accounts. Besides interviews, the document

analysis was also used to review the historical records, municipal documents, books, and past research concerning the history of the Rinconada Area.

Data Gathering Procedure

The process of data collection commenced by seeking the approval of the local government units and other offices located in the municipalities that were to be involved in the study. Upon gaining consent, the researcher selected and approached the possible respondents who have information regarding the historical backgrounds of their respective municipalities. The interviews were followed by the administration of interviews using the prepared semi-structured interview guide. The researcher made sure that the interviews were done systematically and in a respectable way which enabled the respondents to express themselves freely sharing their knowledge and experiences on the historical evolution of their communities. The interviews were recorded to enable the accurate recording of information that was given by the respondents. Moreover, the researcher gathered secondary data through different sources like the municipal archives, historical books, government records and other pertinent information sources that have information on history of Rinconada Area. These sources were also studied closely to compliment the information collected during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis was used to analyze the data obtained through interviews and documentary sources. The researcher properly tabulated and analyzed the collected data with the aim of establishing recurrence patterns, themes, and key historical narrative with regards to the origins of the municipalities of the Rinconada Area of Camarines Sur. This was done by going through the responses of the interview and classifying them according to historical material and finding general themes that explain the development of the municipalities. It is this process that allowed the researcher to put together the data, and create a logical story about the historical beginnings and evolution of the municipalities within the Rinconada Area. Such analytical method made sure that the results of the research are systematically explained and justified both by the oral testimony and written historical records.

Results and Discussion

Historical Origin

The study results indicated that the municipalities within the Rinconada Area of the Camarines Sur have rich historical backgrounds influenced by the settlements, Spanish colonization, geographical as well as local cultures. According to the historical records collected using documents and stories, most towns in the area were initially settlements, which were situated close to rivers, lakes, and coastal areas, which were significant means of livelihood and transportation of early people.

In Baao, historical records show that the early population that inhabited the area was Bikolanos who lived along lakes and rivers. Archaeological findings in the caves in the surrounding areas like Cagraray in Albay and other regions of the Bikol Peninsula are backing the concept that the early Bikolanos had a culture and civilization of their own as seen in the burial jars, pottery and the stone and iron tools. It is assumed that the Baao people lived even prior to the arrival of Spaniards in the sixteenth century in early communities. The town is originally a part of the

bigger municipality of Bula and evolved into a settlement of its own following several migrations because of the unstable marshy climate. The historical accounts also include various accounts of the origin of the name of the town with some making references to the high numbers of turtles in the region referred to as ba-o-o. Other great personalities to come out of the town were the Monsignor Jorge Imperial Barlin, the first Filipino bishop.

The municipality of Balatan was initially a small sitio called Siramag and it was a part of Nabua. The area was inaccessible because it was far-off and there were no good roads to travel by, and one had to travel over mountainous terrain. Local legends give the name Siramag by describing about glowing fishes seen in the night and fried fish that got mouldy when sold in the markets. It was then that on December 3, 1951, President Elpidio Quirino, issued an Executive Order No. 485, in which the municipality was officially established. The town was named after Don Rufino Balatan, the father of Gregorio O. Balatan Sr., who came up with the idea of establishing the municipality. The main sources of livelihood of the inhabitants were fishing and agriculture because the town was situated along the coast of Ragay Gulf.

Historical sources about Bato indicate that the town was previously known as Calilingo which was named after a river that passed through the region. Local folklore holds that the naming of Bato was due to a misperception when a local resident responded to a question about the place by saying the word bato that is translated as rock. It was founded by a decree of the Spanish government on February 15, 1753. The area was made up of multiple surrounding communities which became incorporated as one name, Bato. Another factor that contributed to the development of the town was the development of the religious institutions especially the Parish of the Most Holy Trinity.

The history of the municipality of Buhi tells that the name of the town was named after the Bikol word nakabuhi which means to flee danger. One of the legends links this origin with the survivors of the 1814 eruption of Mayon Volcano that fled to the region and were permanently settled. There is also another story about two brothers who had evaded a snake that had a dangerous experience and eventually settled around the lake region. Lake Buhi was also formed because of volcanic activities and earthquakes that happened in 1641 that resulted in landslides and created a depression that became the lake. Buhi eventually had its own cultural identity; the Buhinon dialect and the status of the world smallest fish, the sinarapan.

Bula was founded in the early Bikol settlements and Spanish evangelization activity in the late 16th century. Missionaries like Pablo de Jesus and Bartolome Ruiz were Franciscan missionaries who were especially instrumental in the founding of the town and the conversion of the region to Christ. Bula name is thought to have been given after the term bala which means split bamboo and this was commonly used by the early inhabitants as tools and crafts. Even in the past, it is documented that the town was often stormed by the enemy in the early times, but the saint who took protection of the town was St. Mary Magdalene who was regarded as the protector of the people.

The history of Nabua has got a close relation with early missionary work of Franciscan priests who founded the Parish of the Holy Cross in 1578. It began as a collection of ranches, with Lupa, Antacodos, Panga, Caobnan, and Bua being some of these

rancherias. Of these, Bua was the epicenter with the development of a chapel to the increasing number of Christians. With time, the name Nabua evolved and replaced the previous name Naboboa which was used to denote the shape of the place which was like the embryo of a coconut. There were various challenges that the community faced like floods and fires which burned down early churches, but the people still managed to restore and enhance their religious organizations.

It was said that the settlement of Iriga City was called Iraga that could be translated as beautiful or flourishing. It was built up because of the migration of some of the Nabua inhabitants to Kit-an-the-foot of the mountain, which we call to-day Iriga Mountain, as a means of escaping frequent flooding. As the Franciscan missionaries arrived, the settlement slowly expanded into a bigger community and turned out to be a visita of Nabua. Infrastructure facilities like roads, chapels and schools were built early to keep pace with the rising population. The community grew to become a great urban center within the Rinconada region although there were various challenges such as fires and typhoons which erased the initial structures of the churches.

Early Settler

Among the themes uncovered during the analysis, the existence of the early settlements and prehistoric culture formation among the ancient Bikolanos deserves to be mentioned as one of the most important ones. According to the history given by Baa, the early settlers were Bikolanos who lived near lakes and rivers. Archaeological findings in the *surrounding regions like the Bikol Peninsula caves show evidence of a pre-existing culture and civilization among the people living in the area, with such artifacts as burial jars, pottery, and stone and iron tools*. These inferences denote that settlements were already in existence in the Rinconada Area even before the advent of the Spanish colonizers. The same trends of early settlement were found in the history of Bula and Nabua whose early villages had been established before Spain evangelized them.

The presence of prehistoric culture and the existence of early settlements among the ancient Bikolanos is in line with the research findings of the past that indicates development of early communities in the Philippines. An archaeological study of the Bikol Peninsula, especially the caves of Cagraray, Albay, has provided evidence of pre-colonial cultural systems by the items they produced, such as burial jars, pottery, and stone and iron tools (Malayaon, 1991). Those data are in line with the works in Bula and Nabua who also reported early village structures before the Spanish colonization (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020; Municipal Planning and Development Office of Balatan, n.d.). The literature would indicate that the settlements in Rinconada region were not unique and are indicative of a larger trend of initial organization of the society in Bikol based on the adaptation to natural resource coupled with the sophisticated cultural activities of the pre-colonial residents. The historical and archaeological knowledge offers an avenue of exploring the cultural continuity and socio-historical development in the area.

Effect of Spanish colonization and Missionary work.

The other key theme that came out of the analysis is the influential role played by Spanish colonization and missionary work in the formal development and constructions of towns in the Rinconada Area. According to historical accounts, *Franciscan missionaries were at the forefront of settler-colonization and*

popularization of Christianity in the area. As an example of this, the foundation of the Parish of the Holy Cross in the year 1578 in Nabua led to the start of religious and social organization in the region. Likewise, Bula was among the first towns that received the message of the Franciscan missionaries in the end of the sixteenth century. The emergence of churches, chapels, and mission posts led to the establishment of organized communities and enhanced the power of Christianity in the area. The missionary work in Iriga City also resulted in the building of religious buildings and the naming of the settlement as a visita of Nabua which further contributed to its development as a community.

Influences in Settlement development in geographical and environmental

The thematic analysis also unveiled that geographical and environmental factors were very instrumental in influencing the patterns of settlement of the municipalities. *Most of the communities that were first opened in the Rinconada Area were situated along rivers, lakes or coastal shores since these areas had water resources, modes of transport and food.* Nevertheless, the environmental issues like floods and wetland areas usually displaced people. In Baao, the initial settlement places were displaced a couple of times because of unfavorable weather patterns and low levels of marshlands around the lake. Similarly, the pioneers of Iriga City moved out of Nabua to the elevated grounds by the base of Mount Asog, which today is called the Mount Iriga to avoid constant submergence. These are also environmental events that transformed the landscape and development of the communities, e.g. the earthquakes and the volcanoes that formed Lake Buhi in the municipality of Buhi.

Geographical and environmental factors affect the settlement patterns provide findings which are in line with the current literature on the pre-colonial and early Philippine communities. The researchers of the early settlement in the Philippines underline the fact that very often the communities appeared along the rivers, along the lakes, along the coasts, as they could find fresh water, food sources, and transport paths (Allison and Ellis, 2001; Smith and Cruz, 2010).

Myths and Linguistic Etymology of Municipal Nomenclature

The other theme that is repeated throughout the historical accounts is the use of legends, cultural tales and linguistic interpretations to describe the origin of the names of the municipalities. In most instances, names of towns were based on the names of local words, landmarks or misinterpretation between the Spanish settlers and their indigenous residents. As an example, the name of Bato is said to have been derived by the Bikol term of *rock*, that was allegedly uttered by one of the inhabitants who happened to be a native, when he was questioned about the location. On the same note, the name Buhi can be linked to the term *nakabuhi*, which translates as escaping danger, founded on the legend of those that survived and settled in the region. The name Bula also Bula is associated with the *division of bamboo* that was used by the early people of Bula as tools and crafts. Meanwhile, Balatan is also linked with *sea resources* located in the coastal region, especially *sea cucumbers* which the early settlers harvested and even traded them. These language descriptions and myths bring out the cultural identity and oral traditions that persist to date the historical accounts of the municipalities.

The repetitive characteristic of applying legends, cultural stories and language explanations to dwell on how the municipal

names came to be is well served by the literature on Philippine ethnolinguistics and oral traditions. Scholars have observed that the pre-colonial and early colonial societies usually imprinted the local histories, beliefs and environmental observations into names of places, which not only captured the cultural practices but also the interaction with the settlers (Malanyaon, 1991; Jocano, 2001). As an example, Bato, which was named after the Bikol word meaning rock, and Buhi, after the word *nakabuhi* meaning to escape danger can be used to see how natural features and stories of survival were incorporated into local identity. On the same note, the implication of bamboo tools associated with Bula and Balatan with sea resources such as sea cucumbers depict the significance of material culture and subsistence in toponymy. The results are in line with larger researches highlighting the significance of oral histories and linguistic materials as an essential source of information regarding the cultural identity, community memory, and historical growth in the Philippines.

Conclusion

Based on the research historical accounts, archival records, and oral records, one can conclude that the historical backgrounds of the municipalities of the Rinconada Area of Camarines Sur such as Baao, Balatan, Bato, Buhi, Bula, Nabua and Iriga City are the result of the combination of early human settlement, Spanish colonization and missionary work, the geographical and environmental factors, and the local cultural discourse. It was found that ancient Bikolanos were originally located along lakes and rivers, along as well as coastal regions and that such early settlements already had different cultural and technological activities that was evidently seen by archaeological evidence in the form of burial jars, pottery, and tools.

The Spanish missionary works contributed greatly to the formalization of these settlements, the introduction of Christianity as well as the institutions of organized parishes and infrastructure, which had a bearing on the social, cultural and political development of the municipalities. More so, geographical and environmental conditions such as flooding, marshy lands and volcanic activities influenced relocation and settlement patterns, and this shaped the place where communities eventually settled. The identity of the towns was also focused on the local legends, linguistic interpretations, and oral traditions that could be found in the etymology of the name of the town and legends of their origin.

Overall, the municipalities of the Rinconada Area have been a story of the evolution of human greatness in terms of adapting to the environment and external forces, and cultural survival amid the effects of external influence and prevailing cultural norms. The fact that they emerged proves the resourcefulness, strength, and richness of the early inhabitants that characterize the identity and heritage of the region to date. Conservation and documentation of these historical accounts is necessary in the learning of the common memory and cultural identity of the Rinconada communities.

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